

Bells Mill Jumps Ahead

Council votes 'no' on Kendale but can't agree on an alternative in school fight.

[By Ken Millstone/The Almanac](#)

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When the County Council convened May 11 to vote — once and for all, they hoped — on how to fix the elementary schools in the Potomac area, only about 25 citizens came.

"People are tired," said Ken Hartman, an aide to Councilmember Howard Denis (R-1).

Those who did attend watched for nearly two hours before the Council took its first vote, one that effectively ended the Montgomery County School Board's plan to close Seven Locks Elementary School and build a replacement school on Kendale Road by denying a \$3.3 million appropriation needed for the project.

That vote — a 6-3 split with Councilmembers Nancy Floreen (D-At Large), Mike Knapp (D-2) and Michael Subin (D-At Large) supporting the funding — only codified a position the Council took informally seven weeks ago.

Following another hour of debate, the Council could not agree on an alternative to building on Kendale, and left the \$14 million committed to the now-defunct project on the table.

"THIS ISSUE IS one of the longest-lived that I have experienced in my tenure on the Council and it is also one of the most disturbing," Denis said in a speech to the Council. "I am leery of a Rube Goldberg complex scheme of musical chairs for fear of who might lose when the music stops. I fear this has become more complex and adversarial than necessary. ... The good news is that we're in agreement as to the need for a new school."

So far, that's where the agreement ends.

Denis' solution — by far the most popular in public hearings since he proposed it in March — is to use the Kendale money to raze and rebuild Seven Locks on its current site.

Denis's proposal, as an amendment to the six-year construction planning document already in effect (the FY2006-2011 Capital Improvements Program), needed six votes to pass the nine-member council May 11. It only mustered five votes, from Denis, Phil Andrews (D-3), Council President George Leventhal (D-At Large), Tom Perez (D-5), and Marilyn Praisner (D-4).

But five votes would pass the Denis plan if offered as a new plan in the FY2007-2012 CIP. That could happen as soon as May 17, when the Council is set to take up the Churchill issues again, after the Almanac's Tuesday press time.

THE SCHOOL BOARD, which supported Kendale in the face of widespread opposition and a critical report from the Office of Inspector General, has volleyed back with a new plan: use the Kendale money to accelerate an overhaul of Bells Mill and make minor repairs at Potomac and Seven Locks.

The new Bells Mill would have classrooms for 618 children and a core capacity of 740, meaning that its bathrooms, cafeteria, and media center would support 740 if additional classrooms are added in the future. The school — a modified version of the one planned for Kendale Road — would open in July 2009.

The school system and community would conduct a boundary study to move some students from Potomac Elementary to the new Bells Mill. A boundary change would be necessary under almost any capacity relief plan, but several Council members strongly oppose any plan that would change boundaries twice.

Seven Locks would be modernized in 2011, as previously planned, and would grow to a capacity of roughly 400 students, Weast said to the Council Education Committee May 16. More study would be needed to pinpoint the number, which could be significantly smaller, he said.

"There is unanimous support for this new approach" on the School Board even though there has not been time for a vote, Board President Charles Haughey wrote in a memo to Subin. "It addresses the space needs of Bells Mill and Potomac elementary schools in a timely manner."

School Board member Nancy Navarro said in an e-mail that she does not support the new recommendation "because it only includes minor maintenance for Seven Locks ES. It does not modernize Seven Locks ES until 2011."

"I did not realize that an official letter was to be sent out. Once I realized this, I contacted [Haughey] right away but the letter had already been sent," she wrote. "I also spoke to Board member Ervin, who is out of town, and she is not in support of the compromise for the same reasons I have stated."

School Board critics said the new proposal is just a dressed-up version of plans that have already been rejected.

"The implications of this proposal are clear: Seven Locks will remain vulnerable to closure, and its students to redistricting in 2008," Seven Locks PTA President Harlivleen Gill wrote to the Council. "This is, of course, the barely hidden agenda of the majority of The Board of Education. ... [It] is simply a different way for the Board of Education to obtain the result it has desired all along: build the Kendale school (although now on the Bells Mill site) and close Seven Locks. "

Weast addressed those concerns at the May 16 Education Committee meeting.

"I think it is an issue of trust and I think the trust is always broken when you don't have all the transparency," he said. "We are recommending a mod[ernization] of Seven Locks. ... Regardless of the number [of students], I'm not recommending the closure of Seven Locks. I'm leaving it in the six years' [Capital Improvements Program], leaving it exactly where it was."

COUNCIL SPOKESMAN Patrick Lacefield said that Denis' amendment still has the votes it needs.

"The only question is whether the school system is going to read the writing on the wall," he said.